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Romanian folklore in Mircea Eliade's work

ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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This paper, "Romanian folklore in Mircea Eliade's work", analyzes under the form of a monographic study, the links between Mircea Eliade with folklore, a field that has caused him to display a constant interest, visible both in his scientific research and in his artistic work. For achieving the proposed target we had to study the entire work of Eliade: journalism, essays, studies of the history of religions, literature (novels, short stories, plays) and, in addition, the identification of relationships between history of religions and the great Romanian folklorists. The scientific nature of this study is supported by the activity of going through the critical references to the work of Eliade and an essential bibliography of Romanian folklore.

The paper is structured in four chapters. The first of it, "Myth and folklore, clarification of the terms" aims to define the two concepts in the thinking of the great philosopher. Divided in turn into two chapters, "Myth: structure, form and function" and "Folklore as «degraded version» of the myth", this segment is the one addressing from a philosophical perspective the conceptions of Mircea Eliade on myth and folklore.

The myth issue is discussed by the historian of religions since his earlier writings, the youth ones, being present afterwards in most of his studies. *Aspecte ale mitului (Aspects of the myth)* is, from this point of view, the most relevant book of Eliade, in which he addresses the myth by definition, classification, identification of structure and function. Regarded as a "sacred history" that occurred during overarching beginnings in *illo tempore*, the myth sums up, according to Mircea Eliade, two values: "this history is regarded as absolutely *true* (because it refers to realities) and *sacred* (because it is the work of supernatural beings)¹".

The definition that Mircea Eliade gives to the myth starts from his conception of the sacred, which is also defined by reference to the profane. The historian of religions imposes the concept of *hierophany* to describe the manifestation of the sacred in the world. But the

¹ Mircea Eliade, *Aspecte ale mitului (Aspects of the Myth)*, in Romanian by Paul G. Dinopol, foreword by Vasile Nicolescu, Bucharest, Univers Publishing House, 1978, p. 18.

concept of the sacred, in turn, involves two other elements: the sacred space and sacred time, to which the profane space and profane time correspond. The witness of these dimensions is the archaic man, of the traditional society, that "primitive", defined by Eliade as *homo religiosus*. For the archaic man, the only reality is myth, because it tells about a creation, about how the world came into being, and therefore he will serve as a model. To be in reality as closer to the gods and sacred, the "Primitive" will mimic the deeds of his ancestors.

For Mircea Eliade, folk materials are important sources for defining and identifying the mentality of the archaic society, the folklore having and preserving written or oral testimonies that betray the structure and spirituality of *homo religiosus*. And these testimonies are, according to the historian of religions, "degraded versions" of the myth.

The second chapter of the work, "Topics and motifs of Romanian folklore", aims to identify and develop the topics and motifs analyzed by Mircea Eliade. First of all, this segment reveals, in an introductory way, Eliade's interest in folklore, starting from his earlier writings and up to the extensive studies of the history of religions. Mircea Handoca brought together in four volumes, the journalism writings of Eliade, between the years 1921-1928, in the cycle of *Scriseri de tinerețe: Cum am descoperit piatra filosofală, Misterele și inițierea orientală, Itinerariu spiritual (Youth Writings: How I discovered the Philosopher's Stone, Mysteries and Oriental Initiation, Spiritual Itinerary)* and *Apologia virilității (Virility Apology)*, volumes particularly important for treating this topic. One can see Eliade's interest for folklore even from his naive writings written when he was 15 years old, observing every year an increasingly more extensive documentation on myth and folklore.

The chapter is segmented in turn into six sub-chapters as follows: "Cosmogony", "Zalmoxis" "Zane (fairies), iele (wicked fairies) călușari (group of dancers of Romanian folk dance)", "Master Manole" "Miorita", "Medical folklore. Mandrake cult". The Romanian cosmogonic myth was approached by Mircea Eliade in *De la Zalmoxis la Genghis-Han (From Zalmoxis to Genghis Khan)*, one of its representative volumes, which includes studies on Romanian folklore. Starting, by a comparable method, from the studies of its folklorist predecessors, Eliade identifies some elements in Romanian cosmogony: the presence of *deus otiosus* – the god who, after having created the world, withdrew - the principle of primordial waters – of Indian origin - and the cosmological sinking of the Devil. In the conception of Mircea Eliade, the cosmogonic myth is a model for all myths, creation because it tells how the world came into being. Other myths are called myths of origin, and they resume the story of creation of the other elements of humanity: plants, animals, buildings, social bonds and so on.

The sub-chapter dedicated to Zalmoxism aims to situate Mircea Eliade's interpretation of the myth of Zalmoxis in the context of opinions formulated by its predecessors. The interest for Zalmoxis' cult is a prominent one in the studies of the historian of religions, as it is also reflected in the title of journal (which was published only in three issues) *Zalmoxis*, a unique project in Romania, initiated by the historian of religions.

The subchapter "Zane (fairies), iele (wicked fairies) călușari (group of dancers of Romanian folk dance)" brings to the fore the interest of Mircea Eliade for the characters of Romanian mythology. Starting from the image they have in traditional society, reconstituted from the versions collected by various folklorists, Mircea Eliade identifies a possible origin of them in the cult of goddess Diana and places them in the context of the debate of witchcraft in Europe in volume *Ocultism, vrăjitorie și mode culturale. Eseuri de religie comparată. (Occultism, witchcraft and cultural currents. Essays of comparative religion.)* The motif of iele (wicked fairies), of zanelor (fairies), is one we might say obsessive for the historian of religions, as it also manifests in his literature. The same thing is observed in the case of călușari (group of dancers of Romanian folk dance)- regarded in the folklore of the Romanian people, as those who heal people from the curse of Pentecost, evil fairies - the motif being present, as we shall see in the next chapter, in the novel *Nouăsprezece trandafiri (Nineteen roses)*.

The above reasons are followed by Mircea Eliade's interpretation of the two fundamental myths of the Romanian people, artistically crystallized in *Miorița* and *Master Manole* ballads. The analysis of their variants can be frequently found in the work of the historian of religions, which in their interpretation starts from the studies of certain folklorists such as Dumitru Caracostea, Constantin Brăiloiu, B.P. Hasdeu etc. In case of *Miorița* one can encounter the attitude towards death, while in case of *Master Manole* ballad, the offering creation, which is placed in the universal context of construction rituals.

Equally important are Eliade's views on medical Romanian folklore, on magic medicine, where a special place is occupied by the study of mandrake cult. The interest in traditional medicine was manifested from his earlier writings, Eliade maintaining a correspondence with the famous doctor from Cluj, Valeriu Bologa. The same was the case with mandrake, the plant that would fascinate him all the time and in relation to which he planned to write a volume, *La Mandragore*, a project that will remain unfinished though.

The third chapter, "Folklore and Literature", includes two major segments: Mircea Eliade's views on folk literature and folk motifs presence in his books. A convinced opponent of the samanatorist current in literature, Mircea Eliade condemns the lack of imagination of

writers who make use of folk motifs, but omit what is more important: the "fantastic presence." In his view, "literature, oral or written, is the daughter of mythology and it inherited some of its functions: to tell stories, to tell something significant that has happened in the world"².

Mircea Eliade's belle-letters aims to capture this "fantastic presence."

All novels, short stories and plays of the historian of religions are falling within fantasy literature, and all of these include, in a more or less visible manner, an element of Romanian traditional culture or of Romanian mythology. This segment of the paper discusses titles like *Isabel și Apele Diavolului* (Isabel and Devil's Waters) – the debut novel of Mircea Eliade which includes the motif of the Devil and of sinking – *Nouăsprezece trandafiri* (Nineteen roses) - which includes the motif of Călușarilor dance and the presence of character "The Mute", an indispensable member of the troop - the novel *Domnișoara Christina* (Miss Christina) – which explores the ghost motif, the action happening during the Peasant Uprising of 1907 - the novel *Șarpele* (The Serpent) – in which one can see the charm motif and the remark of the central character, Andronicus, who confesses the feeling that he belongs to the walls of the monastery, around which the action takes place – the micro-novel *Pe Strada Mântuleasa* (On Mântuleasa Street) – which abounds in symbols and which includes the mandrake charm and the motif of the underground dwelling, similar to that of Zalmoxis who withdraws in it over periods of three years - and, last but not least, the masterpiece of Mircea Eliade, as the author calls it, *Noaptea de Sânziene* (Night of Fairies) - which includes the permanent obsession of the philosopher for the summer solstice, a novel that has had countless interpretations, from the point of view of literary criticism, and from that of Eliade's commentators, who have tried to decipher the symbols and assign them a correspondent in its political beliefs.

The last chapter, a smaller one, aims to identify the relationship between Mircea Eliade with Romanian folklorists: Valeriu Bologa – the physician from Cluj with whom Eliade carried a correspondence; Moses Gaster and Lazăr Șăineanu - of Hebrew origin who were expelled from the country, which has aroused Eliade an attitude of rebellion, two great folklorists that he appreciated and to whom he dedicated articles in the journals of the time - B.P. Hasdeu – the great scholar for whom Eliade had a high respect and to whom he dedicated numerous studies and including a reediting of the work - Constantine Brăiloiu - the

² Mircea Eliade, *Încercarea Labirintului. Convorbiri cu Claude-Henri Rocquet (The Labyrinth Test. Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet)*, translation and notes by Doina Cornea, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia Publishing House, 1990, p. 141-142.

great folklorist, musicologist, appreciated for the studies on *Miorița* ballad - Ovid Densusianu - an opponent of samanatorist current -, Dumitru Caracostea - perhaps the most quoted folklorist in Eliade's studies -, Ion Mușlea - founder of the Yearbook of Folklore Archive from Cluj -, Ion-Aurel Candrea - author who completed the knowledge of Eliade on botany and on the study of mandrake -, Nicolae Cartoian - the one who contributed significantly to the study of old Romanian books and to old Romanian literature - Peter Caraman - Mircea Eliade's collaborator to *Zalmoxis* journal, the one with whom would carry a correspondence and exchange of books -, Simeon Florea Marian appreciated, especially for his studies on Romanian cosmogony - and, not least, Ion Diaconu - Ovid Densusianu's student who sustained the research work in the provincial environment.

Although this paper analyzed Mircea Eliade's views on Romanian traditional culture, it does not discuss a controversial topic: the links between Eliade's political beliefs and his interest in Romanian folklore. Mircea Eliade has been repeatedly accused by some researchers, exonerated by others, that this subject is almost exhausted and has no place in the present study. He does not want to make an analysis of the political ideologies of the times, Eliade's exoneration or accusation of fascism, Iron Guard, anti-Semitism, but on the contrary, he benefits from a neutral analysis perfectly delimited in case of the chosen topic.

The main bibliography consists of the writings of Mircea Eliade, which include all the important titles that discuss the issue of folklore, including journalism, memoirs, diaries, essays, scientific volumes and literary writings (novels, short stories, plays). The secondary bibliography sums up the main titles of Romanian folklore bibliography, destined to clarify certain topics and motifs discussed by the historian of religions, and the few titles that discuss the presence of folklore in the writings of Mircea Eliade.

The paper "The Romanian folklore in the work of Mircea Eliade" does not assume the merit of exhausting the bibliography or the topic, but enjoys the monographic character acquired, following the analysis of the elements which belong to the folklore domain, from the entire work of Eliade.